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PHILIP FRENEAU, THE POET OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

Few of the students of American history have more than a mere nominal acquaintance with the poets of our Revolutionary period. The reason, perhaps, is not far to seek. There were but few poets in America during those times of disorder and strife, times not favorable to the production of literature, whether prose or poetry. The Muse is shy and loves peace and quiet; she does not dwell in a land of turmoil and strife. Yet the Muse, if duly invoked, will come even in war times and inspire the poet's song. We know that there were poets in our country during the Civil War, and so there were writers of verse in America during the Revolutionary War. Who else could have given rhythmical expression to the sentiments of freedom that must have filled the breast of the Revolutionary soldier during that long, weary period from the battle of Lexington to the surrender at Yorktown? Can we suppose that Washington's soldiers, as they sat night after night around their scant camp fires at Valley Forge, talking over their hardships and privations, had no war songs, no ballads to revive their drooping spirits and give them fresh courage and inspiration for battles to come? Such a supposition is well-nigh unthinkable. Some one, therefore, must have composed these songs and ballads. That is the office of the poet.

It is one of these singers of Revolutionary times that forms the subject of the present sketch. Philip Freneau was no "idle singer of an empty day." He was more than a writer of verse. He was a bluff seaman; and when American independence was declared, he fitted out a ship and put to sea, and there inflicted many heavy losses upon the British mer-

*The Poems of Philip Freneau, Poet of the American Revolution. Edited for the Princeton Historical Association. By Fred Lewis Pattee. Vol. I. Princeton, N. J., The University Library, 1902.

chantmen. He not only sung the victories and daring deeds of the Revolutionary soldier, but when our independence was won—and he himself labored to win it—he also helped to shape, in a humble way, the policy and destiny of our nation. A journalist by profession, wielding a trenchant, vigorous pen, he edited one after another of the important party journals of the times, and made their influence tell. He spoke out in no uncertain tones with reference to the questions which then engaged public attention, and he contributed powerfully in forming public opinion upon those questions. For instance, he refused to indorse certain measures of Washington's administration and ardently supported Genet's appeal from the president to the people—an event which marked a crisis in the early history of our nation. He also strenuously opposed the United States Bank.

Philip Freneau was born in the city of New York on the 2d of January, 1752. His father was Pierre Freneau, of Huguenot descent, and his mother was Agnes Watson, a relative of the antiquary, John Fanning Watson. When the boy was but two years old, his father moved from New York to Mount Pleasant, a country place near Freehold, N. J. Here young Philip spent his boyhood days and attended school, till he entered Princeton College. At Princeton he enjoyed the distinction of having Madison for his roommate and Burr for a classmate. He was graduated from his *alma mater* in 1771 and started out in the world to make his way. But he never forgot the old home at Mount Pleasant, and was always glad to return to the scenes of his childhood.

After his graduation, Freneau studied law and taught school, but only to become wearied with each as a profession. He then conceived the idea of going to sea, and set out on a voyage to the Danish West Indies. Two years later he made a voyage to Bermuda, and soon learning to master a ship, he became very fond of sea life. When he learned that American Independence was declared, he obtained letters of marque and reprisal from the Continental Congress, and is reputed to have captured and destroyed many a British merchant ship. On a voyage to the West Indies in 1780 he

was captured by the British cruiser *Scorpion* and held a prisoner for some time. His experiences as a prisoner he subsequently described in the lines entitled "The British Prison Ship." After the close of the war he followed various pursuits, first as an editor and then as a captain of a vessel making regular voyages to the West Indies and later to the Southern States. In 1790 he abandoned the sea and entered journalism, a profession which had for him a remarkable fascination.

Freneau launched out upon the sea of journalism as editor of the *New York Daily Advertiser*. However, for some reason he soon resigned this post, and we next find him in control of the *National Gazette*. It was while he was editor of this journal that he attacked Washington, against whom and the Federalists in general he directed the keenest shafts of his criticism. Indeed, so violent were his attacks that Hamilton, the leader and able exponent of the Federalist party, accused Freneau of being the pensioned tool of Jefferson, who was the recognized head of the opposite party. This charge by Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury, elicited from Freneau an explanatory letter to President Washington, and the incident was closed. Without entering upon the question of the truth or falsity of the charge, it may be observed that Freneau had been employed by Jefferson, the Secretary of State, as translator for the State Department. Moreover, it was alleged that Jefferson was Freneau's political patron. Whether this be true or not does not fall within the scope of this sketch to discuss, but there is no doubt that Freneau shared Jefferson's political opinions and was an ardent supporter of his views.

Freneau severed his connection with the *National Gazette* not long after this incident, and subsequently became editor of the *Jersey Chronicle*, which he published from his home at Mount Pleasant, N. J. In 1797, however, we find him again in New York, where he undertook to edit and publish the *Timepiece and Literary Companion*; but in keeping with his roving nature he soon resigned this position also. It may be remarked to his credit that while he was editor of this paper

he exerted a marked influence for good writing, and by terse, vigorous English endeavored to make the journal more than a mere news sheet. After his retirement from the *Time-piece and Literary Companion* Freneau dropped out of public notice, and for the remnant of his days must have retired to private life. The evening of life he spent at his home at Mount Pleasant, where he occupied his time in reading, in answering the letters of his many correspondents, and in writing an occasional article for the press. His end was sudden and tragic. In December, 1832, while returning in a snowstorm from the village circulating library, chilled and benumbed by the cold, he fell and broke his hip, and was found dead by the roadside. He was buried at his home under his favorite tree, under the shade of which he wrote many of his stirring poems. Such was the tragic end of the most original and gifted poet of the American Revolution.

It is a matter of regret that most of Freneau's prose writing is of a temporary character. Its interest hardly survived the occasion that called it into being. Still, his prose is worth reading, and throws considerable light upon those times, upon contemporary men and public questions. It naturally divides itself into two kinds: first, brief essays on miscellaneous subjects, after the fashion of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, travels and report of an imaginary character in the manner of Voltaire; secondly, political disquisitions and translations from the French. Freneau's political essays are witty and humorous and written in an easy style. His attacks upon contemporary public men were stinging and of a drastic sort, and his opponents must have winced under the shafts of his keen satire. Freneau was a good French scholar, and his translations for the State Department were presumably faithful and clear. He must also have been a good classical scholar, for his rendition of the first ode of the first book of Horace, Nereus's prophecy of the destruction of Troy, was the happiest up to that time, and remains still unsurpassed in our literature.

But it is not his tirades and invectives against his polit-

ical opponents who, for one reason or another, drew his fire, nor his philosophical disquisitions, nor his accurate and graceful translations, by which he is remembered and known. It is his patriotic ballads, his war songs, that far more than his prose have contributed to make his name more than a mere shadow.

From early childhood Freneau is said to have shown a decided penchant for verse. Such was his aptitude at versifying that, when a student at Princeton, he wrote a poem in four cantos, entitled "The Poetical History of the Prophet Jonah," which was regarded as very clever and creditable. When only in his nineteenth year he composed a poem, "The Pyramids of Egypt," which Edward F. Delancey, the New York lawyer and historian, thinks "extraordinary as the work of a youth of eighteen years," and compares favorably with Bryant's "Thanatopsis." In the early part of his career, while in the West Indies, Freneau wrote two of his finest poems, "The Beauties of Santa Cruz," and "The House of Night." The first of these is a descriptive poem of considerable length, and the second a weird, imaginative poem suggesting something of Poe's "Raven." The author used his poetical talents again and again during the dark days of the Revolution to revive the depressed spirits of the American soldier. He threw himself, heart and soul, into the struggle for American independence, and wrote and fought for this worthy purpose. It was this cause that inspired his genius and called forth his stirring patriotic ballads. Nor did he grow weary during the seven long years of bitter privation and hardship; but by song and example, with untiring devotion and unabated zeal, he endeavored to keep alive in the breast of others the fervent desire for the freedom of his country which glowed in his own bosom.

"The British Prison Ship" is probably Freneau's most popular poem. As has been said, it was written to commemorate the author's experiences while a prisoner on the British ship *Scorpion*. The circumstances of the composition of this ballad remind one of those in which Francis Scott Key, the laureate of the war of 1812, penned the lines of the "Star-

Spangled Banner," as he paced the deck of the British frigate under the belching guns of Fort McHenry. Freneau's poem is, of course, longer and lacks the lilt and fire of Key's stirring lyric. The dirge over the heroes who fell at the battle of Eutaw Springs is one of the finest things that Freneau ever did, antedating by some years Campbell's "Hohenlinden," which it suggests. It is interesting to note that Campbell paid Freneau the compliment to borrow a line from the latter's "Indian Burying Ground"—"The hunter and the deer a shade"—which he incorporated into his "O'Connor's Child;" and Sir Walter Scott has a line in the introduction to the third canto of "Marmion," which offers a striking parallel to a line in Freneau's "Eutaw Springs"—"They took the spear, but left the shield." If imitation be the sincerest form of flattery, surely Freneau must have felt flattered when these English poets thus acknowledged their admiration of his verses. A shining example of our poet's skill as a balladist are the lines "On the Memorable Victory," written to commemorate the celebrated naval victory of Paul Jones in the North Sea.

Freneau had a genuine appreciation of nature, and this feeling found expression in a number of his poems. Some of these, such as "To a Honey Bee," and "The Wild Honeysuckle," show distinct delicacy of feeling and lightness of touch. Indeed, some critics consider these two snatches of song the best poems of Freneau, and they are probably not far wrong. I venture to quote the four stanzas of "The Wild Honeysuckle," as exhibiting our poet's intense love of nature as well as his art and facility in versification:

Fair flower, that dost so comely grow,
 Hid in this silent, dull retreat,
 Untouched thy honeyed blossoms blow,
 Unseen thy little branches greet;
 No roving foot shall crush thee here,
 No busy hand provoke a tear.

By nature's self in white arrayed,
 She bade thee shun the vulgar eye,
 And planted here the garden shade,
 And sent soft waters murmuring by;
 Thus quietly thy summer goes,
 Thy days declining to repose.

Smit with these charms, that must decay,
I grieve to see thy future doom;
They died—nor were those flowers more gay,
The flowers that did in Eden bloom;
Unpitying frosts, and autumn's power,
Shall leave no vestige of this flower.
From morning suns and evening dews,
At first thy little being came;
If nothing once, you nothing lose,
For when you die you are the same;
The space between is but an hour,
The frail duration of a flower.

Assuredly the feeling that inspired this graceful tribute is akin to Wordsworth's love for the daffodil and the daisy. We must search American literature far before we find anything that surpasses this little ode. It makes one feel that Freneau merits more attention than he has received at the hands of those who make up our anthologies.

Freneau was a versatile and facile poet, and, in addition to his war lyrics and descriptions of nature, wrote on a variety of subjects. But he was withal a very unequal poet, and his verses show some glaring defects. Some of his poems, as, for instance, those mentioned above, are cleverly conceived and gracefully expressed. Others are carelessly written and reveal a lack of finish and style. Freneau was apparently like Byron, if we may compare a minor with a great poet, faulty in the technical execution of his work, and frequently lapsed into carelessness and seeming indifference to his art. In explanation of this we are told that Freneau was by nature indolent and impulsive and lacked application. Nor is it hard to believe this when we examine his work. It is a matter of regret that he did not take more pains with the children of his poetic invention and write more uniformly up to his level. But it is needless to lament.

Freneau has been given various sobriquets by the ardent admirers of his genius, such as the "Poet of the Revolution," the "Laureate of the War of Independence," and the "Patriot Poet." These are not altogether empty, gratuitous titles, as can be seen from an examination of his poetry that has survived to the present; for the charm, vigor, and passion of his

verse deservedly entitle him to this distinction beyond all his rival contemporaries. No American poet of that period was inspired by a more intense, passionate love for the freedom of his country, or gave expression to this feeling in more impassioned verse. Apart from his patriotic songs, Freneau wrote some lyrics that breathe a genuine poetic spirit and bespeak a nice appreciation of nature. He had also the perilous gift of satire; and some of his satiric verses are as poignant and drastic as those of Byron or Dryden. But it will not be by his satire and invective, nor by his poems on nature, however delicate and beautiful these may be, that Freneau will live. It was his fervent love for American independence that first loosed his tongue, and it is the patriotic ballads in which that love found impassioned utterance that will plead for the retention of his name in American literature.

EDWIN W. BOWEN.